

# The Thief of Bagdad

By Joe Morgenstern

"The A List: The National Society of Film Critics' 100 Essential Films," 2002

In the very first scene of the "The Thief of Bagdad," it is written in the stars — literally written in the starry sky of a desert night — that "happiness must be earned." Truer words were never twinkled for Douglas Fairbanks's thief, an uncommonly rambunctious commoner who embarks on a succession of physical and moral tests to make himself worthy of a beautiful princess. For us, though, more than two hours of happiness are there for the taking in this Arabian Nights fantasy, which was made in 1924 and still stands as a shining achievement of the silent era.

The movie is actually much longer than two hours, the running was originally 155 minutes, though it's shorter by sixteen minutes in a luminous version now available on DVD. Fairbanks, who also produced and wrote the script (under the pseudonym of Elton Thomas), sets the tone with a performance that is fearlessly extravagant and hugely endearing for its self-delight. Like his collaborators in the ambitious production, which was directed by Raoul Walsh, the actor seems to have been thrilled to the point of giddiness with the medium's possibilities. Clad only in pantaloons, headband, and earrings, with a pencil mustache punctuating his smile, Fairbanks leaps, swaggers, and dances through the streets of a Bagdad that clearly knows the thief, Ahmed, and finds him dangerously entertaining. At one moment he climbs a magician's magic rope, then levitates on a balcony while stealing a quick meal. At another he eludes his pursuers by scampering over the backs of worshippers at prayer. At all times he's a prodigy of motion and a delighted witness to his own one-man show.

Silent films at their melodramatic worst can drive modern audiences to distraction with prosaic inter-titles that explain what should have emerged wordlessly. But the silent version of "The Thief of Bagdad" (a fine sound version, starring Sabu, was produced in sumptuous Technicolor by Alexander Korda in 1940) is a model of narrative clarity, with little need for elaborate titles, and no need at all for what we'd call a "back story," a dutiful detailing of how the hero came to be who he is and why he's doing what he does. It's understood that Ahmed steals because he's a thief and that he steals with such style and



Douglas Fairbanks attempting a conquest in the palace. Courtesy Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Online Collection

verve because he has a virtuoso's gift and loves to use it. (In one cheerfully gratuitous gesture he stands on his head and shakes all of his newly purloined coins from his pockets.)

It's just as readily understood that the thief, having stolen the princess's heart, can keep it, and prevail over his royal rivals, only by going on a journey of spiritual transformation. And what a journey it is, even to the jaded eyes of those of who live in digitally enhanced times, when anything that can be imagined can be put on the screen. The imaginings in "The Thief of Bagdad" were those of William Cameron Menzies, one of the most influential visual artists in the history of the motion picture medium and first man to earn the title of production designer. (Fifteen years later he did "Gone With the Wind" and won an Oscar for outstanding use of color.)

Menzies's sets for "The Thief of Bagdad" were, first and foremost, enormous. (Shot in black and white, the movie was, according to custom of the day, tinted in several different colors to correspond with the moods of specific scenes or sequences.) Long before the silver screen stretched itself wide to compete with TV, these environments were notable for their verticality — palace chambers that reached toward cloudless skies, palace gates that rose and fell within soaring chevroned walls. More than that, though, Menzies's designs were works of artistic distinction that caught and held the eyes of moviegoers who may have cared not at all about art but who responded to the power of his sweeping lines. Sometimes "The Thief" fills its screen to bursting with exotic

creatures or swarming troops (real animals and real troops, not glibly digitized phantasms) but there's rarely any clutter. Bold graphic elements — a diagonal slash of a stairway, a vertical string of giant beads along a huge cubist face — enhance the strangeness of a world in which Ahmed struggles with his fabulous adversaries.

It's a world that changes before our own startled eyes from comically energetic to mysteriously lyrical. As a cynical, swashbuckling thief, Douglas Fairbanks finds plenty of time for shameless fun: riding the rails, as it were, of a palanquin into the palace; peering down at the princess from a vantage point atop a tree in her garden; pitching from the back of a bucking horse into a royal rose bush. (The thief has no way of knowing that by touching the bush's magic petals has confirmed himself as his beloved's only legitimate suitor.) Once Ahmed gets religion, however, once he plunges into his perilous tasks, the pace turns slow and dreamlike and the hero is often dwarfed by the stunning scenery.

Few people who aren't filmmakers or film-school students watch silent films these days, and sometimes film students do so reluctantly. (Sometimes film students are reluctant to watch anything that isn't in color, or anything produced before the generation of Spielberg, Scorsese, Coppola, and De Palma.) Yet it's not just educational, it's downright thrilling, even now, to watch the gleeful thief do battle with dragons and flying monsters; to follow him to the bottom of the sea, where he turns his back, regretfully but virtuously, on a bevy of sexy sirens; to see him sally forth at a tree-skimming gallop astride a flying horse, or soar off for a happy ending with his beloved aboard a flying carpet big enough to cover a bedroom. When "The Thief of Bagdad" opened in the late winter of 1924, the "New York Times" called it "a feat of motion picture art which has never been equaled and one which itself will enthrall persons time and time again." I speak as one of those persons when I say that for once a movie critic got it absolutely right.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*